

TESTIMONY OF JADE VAIL BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS SUB COMMITTEE  
Department of Rehabilitative Services Budget (DORS)  
LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING, FEBRUARY 16, 2017

Good evening, members of the committee. My name is Jade Vail; I am from Manchester Connecticut. I am a person with a physical disability and I am an advocate at Independence Unlimited, Inc. Independence Unlimited is a non-residential, non-profit independent living center that serves a diverse population of people with disabilities in Hartford county. I am asking that you restore funding for Independent Living Centers (ILCs) in the 2018-2019 state budget for core services that include advocacy, peer counseling, skills training and information and referral services. The ILCs provide a wide range of services to individuals, regardless of nature or type of disability and, the loss of state dollars will have a dangerously negative impact on the ability of Connecticut's ILCs to provide vital services to some of Connecticut's most vulnerable residents.

I know that, in times of economic crisis, such as we are facing in Connecticut, it is easy to get so caught up in making decisions about dollars and cents that we can sometimes lose sight of the fact that these choices have an impact on real people living in the state. But, were it not for the services provided by Independent Living Centers, thousands of people would be forced to go without the supports they needed to maintain their independence; myself included.

I am a testament to the fact that the work done by Independence Unlimited and our sister centers demonstrates the abilities of people with disabilities to be productive and successful, both personally and professionally. When I sought services from Independence Unlimited in 2008, I considered myself anything but prosperous. At the time, I was homeless and, unemployed. I remember feeling lost, anxious of my uncertain future, and powerless to see how someone like me could do anything to change their situation. But, when I began working with the advocates at Independence Unlimited, I got a whole new view of what it means to be a person with a disability. I learned that, people with disabilities can have a piece of the "American Dream" too; they can hold jobs, travel, attend to their daily needs and, live independently. When I was given the opportunity to become a member of the IU staff, I thought that, if so many others like me could be gainfully employed, maybe I could do it too.

Now, after almost nine years on the job, I have come to realize that my employment with Independence Unlimited as given me much more than just a paycheck and the ability to earn a living. I have gained a confidence and sense of pride in my ability to make a difference in the lives of others. I know now that I have, inside of me the ability to accomplish the goals I set for myself, if I put my mind to them. Best of all, I am now one of the people that our consumers can look at and say to themselves, "If she can do it, maybe I can do it too. IU took a chance and believed in me, and taught me to have the courage to take chances and believe in myself; a lesson for which I will forever be grateful.

But, I fear that if the Governor's current budget is approved, I will be one of the thousands of Connecticut residents that will be forced to go from my own home, to a nursing home. I will become a burden on the system, instead of being able to contribute to it and my sense of purpose, well-being and, value will be greatly diminished.

Year after year I, and many others, have gone to hearings and written testimonies, asking you to help us continue to provide the services and supports that a great number of people with disabilities need. By now we are warned that cuts are likely to come, we are given an explanation as to why these cuts are necessary, but still we persist in asking you to do your part to help us continue to serve people with disabilities in Connecticut. People with disabilities are valuable too and, balancing the budget on the backs of Connecticut's most at risk citizens is wrong. We aspire to the same goals and dreams as everyone else; to be productive, contributing members of our society and our state. Thank you very much for your time.